

Charles Williams (UK writer)

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Charles Walter Stansby Williams (September 20, 1886 – May 15, 1945), was a British poet, novelist, theologian, and literary critic.



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Biography

Williams was born in London in 1886, the only son of Richard and Mary Williams of Islington. He had one sister, Edith, born in 1889. Educated at St Albans School, Hertfordshire, Williams was awarded a scholarship to University College London, but was forced to leave in 1904 without taking a degree because his family lacked the financial resources to support him. In the same year he began work in a Methodist Bookroom. Williams was hired by Oxford University Press as a proofreading assistant in 1908 and continued to work there in various positions of increasing responsibility until his death in 1945. One of his greatest editorial achievements was the publication of the first major English-language edition of the works of Søren Kierkegaard.

Although chiefly remembered as a novelist, Williams also published works of literary criticism, theology, drama, history, biography, and a

voluminous number of book reviews. Some of his best known novels are *War in Heaven* (1930), *Descent into Hell* (1937), and *All Hallows' Eve* (1945). T. S. Eliot, who wrote an introduction for the last of these, described Williams's novels as "supernatural thrillers" because they explore the sacramental intersection of the physical with the spiritual while also examining the ways in which power, even spiritual power, can corrupt as well as sanctify. All of Williams's fantasies, unlike those of J. R. R. Tolkien and most of those of C. S. Lewis, are set in the contemporary world. More recent writers of fantasy novels with contemporary settings, notably Tim Powers, cite Williams as a model and inspiration. W. H. Auden, one of Williams's greatest admirers, reportedly re-read Williams's extraordinary and highly unconventional history of the church, *Descent of the Dove*, (1939) every year. Williams's study of Dante entitled *The Figure of Beatrice* (1944) was very highly regarded at its time of publication and continues to be consulted by Dante scholars today. Williams, however, regarded his most important work to be his extremely dense and complex Arthurian poetry, of which two books were published, *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944), and more

remained unfinished at his death. Some of Williams's best essays were collected and published in Anne Ridler's *Image of the City and Other Essays* in 1958.

Williams gathered many followers and disciples during his lifetime. He was, for a period, a member of the Salvator Mundi Temple of the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, an offshoot of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He met fellow Anglican Evelyn Underhill (who was also affiliated with the Golden Dawn) in 1937 and was later to write the introduction to her published *Letters* in 1943. Williams also formed master-disciple relationships with young women throughout his lifetime. The best known (though probably not the most significant) of these occurred in the early 1940s with Lois Lang Sims. Lang Sims, whom Williams referred to as Lalage, published a series of letters that Williams wrote to her during this period in a volume entitled *Letters to Lalage* (1989). Though Williams married his first sweetheart, Florence Conway, in 1917, he continually struggled to reconcile a lifelong (though probably unconsummated) love affair with Phyllis Jones (who joined the Oxford University Press in 1924 as librarian) with his Christian faith (he was an unswerving and devoted member of the Church of

England, reputedly with a refreshing tolerance of the scepticism of others and a firm belief in the necessity of a "doubting Thomas" in any apostolic body).

Although Williams attracted the attention and admiration of some of the most notable writers of his day, his greatest admirer was probably C. S. Lewis. Williams came to know Lewis after reading Lewis's recently published study *The Allegory of Love*; he was so impressed he jotted down a letter of congratulations and dropped it in the mail. Coincidentally, Lewis has just finished reading Williams's novel *The Place of the Lion* and had written a similar note of congratulations. The letters crossed in the mail and led to an enduring and fruitful friendship. When World War II broke out in 1939, Oxford University Press moved its offices from London to Oxford. Although Williams was reluctant to leave his beloved city, this move did allow him to participate regularly in Lewis's literary society known as The Inklings. In this setting Williams was able to read (and improve) his final published novel, *All Hallows' Eve* as well as to hear J. R. R. Tolkien read some of his early drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* aloud to the group. In addition to meeting in Lewis's rooms at Oxford, they also regularly met at The Eagle and

Child pub in Oxford (better known by its nickname "The Bird and Baby"). During this time Williams also gave lectures at Oxford on John Milton and received an honorary M.A. degree. Williams is buried in Holywell Cemetery, Oxford: his headstone bears the word "poet".

Williams's novels

- ***War in Heaven*** (1930) - The Holy Grail surfaces in an obscure country parish and becomes variously a sacramental object to protect or a vessel of power to exploit.
- ***Many Dimensions*** (1931) - An evil antiquarian illegally purchases the fabled Stone of Suleiman (which never textually uses the more familiar King Solomon) from its Islamic guardian in Baghdad and returns to England to discover not only that the Stone can multiply itself infinitely without diminishing the original, but that it also allows its possessor to transcend the barriers of space and time.
- ***The Place of the Lion*** (1931) - Platonic archetypes begin to appear throughout England, wreaking havoc and drawing to the surface the spiritual strengths and flaws of individual characters.

- ***The Greater Trumps*** (1932) - The original Tarot is used to unlock enormous metaphysical powers by allowing the possessors to see across space and time, create matter, and raise powerful natural storms.
- ***Shadows of Ecstasy*** (1933) - A humanistic adept has discovered that by focusing his energies inward he can extend his life almost indefinitely. He undertakes an experiment using African lore to die and resurrect his own body thereby assuring his immortality. His followers begin a revolutionary movement to destroy European civilization.
- ***Descent into Hell*** (1937) - Generally thought to be Williams's best novel, *Descent* deals with various forms of selfishness, and how the cycle of sin brings about the necessity for redemptive acts. In it, an academic becomes so far removed from the world that he fetishizes a woman to the extent that his perversion takes the form of a succubus. Characters include a doppelgänger and the ghost of a suicidal Victorian builder. It is illustrative of Williams's belief in the replacement of sin and substitutional love.
- ***All Hallows' Eve*** (1945) - Opens with a discussion between the ghosts of two dead women wandering about London. Ultimately

explores the meaning of human suffering and empathy by dissolving the barrier between the living and the dead through both black magic and divine love.

Works

Chronological list of Williams's publications:

- *The Silver Stair* (1912) poems
- *Poems of Conformity* (1917)
- *Divorce* (1920) poems
- *Windows of Night* (1924)
- *The Masque of the Manuscript* (1927) play
- *A Book of Victorian Narrative Verse* (1927) edited collection
- *A Myth of Shakespeare* (1928) play
- *A Masque of Perusal* (1929) play
- *War in Heaven* (1930) novel ISBN 9780802812193
- *Poetry At Present* (1930) criticism
- *The Place of the Lion* (1931) novel ISBN 9781573831086
- *Three Plays* (1931) plays
- *Many Dimensions* (1931) novel ISBN 080281221X
- *The English Poetic Mind* (1932) criticism
- *The Greater Trumps* (1932) novel ISBN 1573831115

- *A Short Life of Shakespeare: with the Sources* (1933) abridgment of Chamber's 'William Shakespeare: A study of Facts & Problems'
- *Shadows Of Ecstasy* (1933) novel (first written in 1925) ISBN 1573831093
- *James I* (1934) biography
- *Rochester* (1935) biography
- *The New Book of English Verse* (1935) editor, with Lord David Cecil, Ernest de Selincourt, E. M. W. Tillyard edited collection
- *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (1936) Canterbury Festival Play
- *Queen Elizabeth* (1936) biography
- *Descent Into Hell* (1937) novel ISBN 9780802812209
- *He Came Down From Heaven* (1938) theology
- *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) poems
- *The Descent of the Dove: a short history of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (1939) theology
- *Judgement at Chelmsford* (1939) play
- *Witchcraft* (1941) history/theology
- *The Forgiveness of Sins* (1942) theology
- *Outlines of Romantic Theology: Religion and Love in Dante* (c. 1930, pub. 1989) theology

- *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (1943) criticism
- *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) poems
- *All Hallows' Eve* (1945) novel ISBN 1573831107
- *The House of the Octopus* (1945) play
- *Flecker of Dean Close* (1946) biography of William Herman Flecker, 1859–1941
- *Arthurian Torso Containing the Posthumous Fragment of The Figure of Arthur* (1948) with C. S. Lewis poetry
- *Seed of Adam and other plays* (1948) plays
- *The Image of the City and Other Essays* (1958) edited by Anne Ridler
- *Collected Plays* (1963) ISBN 9781573833660
- *Charles Williams* (Arthurian Poets) (1991) edited by David Llewellyn Dodds
- *Charles Williams: Essential Writings in Spirituality and Theology* (1993) edited by Charles Hefling
- *Outlines of romantic theology; with which is reprinted Religion & love in Dante: the theology of romantic love* (1990) edited by Alice Mary Hadfield

Literature

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- Walsh, Chad. "Charles Williams's Novels and the Contemporary Mutation of Consciousness," in *Myth, Allegory and Gospel: An Interpretation of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Charles Williams*. John Warwick Montgomery, ed. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974, pp. 53–77.
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Quest — A Kierkegaardian Reading of Charles Williams. Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs, 2000.

- Ashenden, Gavin. *Alchemy and Integration*. Kent State University Press, 2006. (forthcoming)
- Lindop, Grevel. *Charles Williams: The Last Magician*. Oxford University Press. (forthcoming, 2008 or 2009)
- Diana Pavlac Glyer *The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. Kent State University Press. Kent Ohio. 2007. ISBN 978-0-87338-890-0

External links

- The Charles Williams Society
- The Novels of Charles Williams
- Charles Williams Biography
- A Charles Williams Bibliography
- Project Gutenberg of Australia ("W") (Scroll down to download public domain copies of *The Greater Trumps*, *Shadows of Ecstasy*, *The Place of the Lion*, *War in Heaven*, *Descent into Hell*, *Many Dimensions*, and *All Hallows' Eve*)
- (About) Many Dimensions
- The New Christian Year (1941) and The

Passion of Christ (1939), two devotionals
compiled by Charles Williams

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